

## Still Shining Like the Sun

Review of

*Looking for the Sun at Merton's Corner: A Collection of Portraits*

By Susan Griffin Ward

San Francisco, CA: Blurb, 2018

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Reviewed by **Deborah Pope Kehoe**

The year 2018 produced an abundance of materials bearing witness to Thomas Merton's enduring influence on the world fifty years after his death. In addition to scholarship, provocative theorizing and personal recollections, this output also includes artistic tributes. Among them is *Looking for the Sun at Merton's Corner: A Collection of Portraits*, Susan Griffin Ward's compelling book of photographs taken at the setting of one of the most recognized chapters in Merton lore, his 1958 spiritual experience in which his sanctified connection to the rest of humanity was revealed to him and the true nature of his contemplative vocation clarified. The two accounts that Merton gives of this experience (*Search for Solitude* 181-82 and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* 140-42) rise to ecstatic assertions of the dignity of the human condition made glorious by the Incarnation. Susan Griffin Ward's photographs of individuals she encountered at the famous intersection of Fourth and Muhammad Ali (formerly Walnut) emanate Merton's joyful celebration of the indestructible worth of human existence, while at the same time documenting its inescapable sorrows.

The greatest concentration of verbal text in the book is in the Preface, in which Ward relates the series of events from which her project eventually emerged. First, she tells of an afternoon when she sought refuge from a thunderstorm in a bar where the atmosphere took on an air of "euphoria," as a diverse group of people congenially shared the same shelter. She writes: "Surrounded by this cross-section of humanity, I was overcome by the same revelation Merton experienced at a corner in downtown Louisville" (Preface). She goes on to tell of how six months later, when she was participating in "the march on Washington" (presumably that of January of 2017), she had a similar vision of "holy" "strangers" standing "shoulder to shoulder," an experience that she expresses in echoes of Merton's well-rehearsed epiphany: "And everywhere my eyes landed I saw people shining like the sun" (Preface).

It was at that march that Ward decided to undertake the project that became this book. Over the course of what she describes as a distressing year, she stood "at the corner of Fourth and Muhammad Ali looking for the sun" (Preface). She reports: "I was not disappointed. In fact, I've never felt more hopeful. This book is a record of the people I met on that corner, the light in each one of them shining like a beacon in the dark" (Preface).

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The book consists of ninety-six portraits, each containing one or two subjects, people whom Ward met on the street, engaged in brief conversation and asked permission to take their picture. The photographs were made from a variety of angles; some feature a large window in the background; others show the street stretching out behind the subject, variations that give satisfying texture to the work. The mirroring of human forms in the window glass and the convergence effect brought about by the vanishing point perspective visually reinforce the message of integrated unity and shared identity. The one constant in the photos is sunlight, its significance requiring no verbal embellishment.

Ward presents her photos with impressive simplicity. She uses no headings to announce any categories, thereby imposing no divisions. Her subjects differ in age, gender, race, nationality and occupation, and none are named. Yet, she does pair or group certain subjects, such as young parents, aging married couples, self-proclaimed artists, friends and city workers, subtly illustrating the truth that people live in relationship. The photos are accompanied by minimal captioning, effectively deferring to the power of the images to tell their story. The wording that does appear is based, according to Ward, on her “imperfect recollections of conversations” (Preface), exchanges in which those being photographed shared their life’s experiences, aspirations or philosophies: “I’m a Salvationist fighting against the unjust” (80), to cite one. Some captions consist of only Ward’s own words, helpfully displayed in italics, as in “*Beautifully thoughtful*” (66). Several, aptly enough, mention Thomas Merton: “Merton’s corner is special to me” (30), for example.

Ward’s collection of portraits exudes a compassion for humanity resonant with the tone of Merton’s moment of self-discovery sixty years prior to her experiment on the same site. Turning the pages of this book, one can be reminded of the trope sometimes used in speaking to people who are photogenic: “The camera loves you.” When one woman suggests that she is not attractive enough to be photographed, Ward protests, “*But you are so beautiful!*” (43), and her camera does indeed capture the inner beauty of that reluctant woman.

Such exuberant optimism could become cloying if it were not balanced by the poignant acknowledgement of human suffering also present among these portraits of shining faces. A number of those pictured are homeless or formerly homeless, reflecting that lamentable reality of urban life, in Louisville and throughout the world. While Ward does not skirt the cold fact of the plight of the homeless, she preserves their innate dignity, as in the photo of a military veteran “living on the streets,” whose “*proud posture*” Ward notes in her comments (3).

*Looking for the Sun at Merton’s Corner* is a felicitous contribution to Merton studies. The concept of the project makes delightful sense on multiple levels. Not only is the book a well-timed follow-up to Merton’s celebrated verbal portraits of the beauty of humanity that struck his eye “at the corner of Fourth and Walnut,” its value is further enhanced by the fact that Merton was fascinated with the revelatory power of photography, authoritatively discussed in a number of works by Paul Pearson. Finally, while Ward’s book can be viewed online (<https://www.blurb.com/books/8606765-looking-for-the-sun-at-merton-s-corner>), its hard copy sales, according to the author, will go to support area programs for the homeless, adding another commendable feature to Ward’s accomplishment, one that pays homage to Merton’s dedication to charity and passion for justice.